

Sleepy Teens

14-year-old Brooke Erickson likes to sleep. She has to be at school early on the weekdays. On the weekends, she thinks that she should get to sleep as long as she wants.

Brooke's mom disagrees. She thinks that Brooke should get up at the same time every day. This way her body will get used to being up early.

New research indicates that both Brooke and her mom are right.

Sleeping late means sleeping more than two hours past the time a person would normally wake up. Sleeping late on weekends can greatly disrupt the body's sleep/wake cycles. Sleeping late in the mornings makes it harder to fall asleep at night. Staying up later at night makes the body tired. Then it becomes even harder to get up the next morning. Waking up and going to bed at close to the same times every day makes it easier for the body to get the rest it needs.

Most teenagers simply don't get as much sleep as they need. The average teenager needs 8 to 9 hours of sleep each night. Several studies have shown that the average teenager only gets 6 to 7 hours of sleep on school nights.

Why Being Tired is a Problem

Being overtired leads to many problems. Some of the problems are minor and some are very serious. Missing out on sleep can make someone feel grumpy. It can make it harder for the person to handle stress or to control their emotions. They may find that they get angry or feel very sad much more easily. Over time, losing sleep contributes to depression. It can lead to weight gain and acne. It lowers the effectiveness of the immune system. This makes it easier for the person to get sick.

Being tired greatly affects memory. This makes it harder to do well in school. It affects energy levels and coordination. This makes it harder for the person to do well in sports and other activities.

Driving safely is much harder to do when a person is overtired. When a person is tired, the time it takes for him or her to make a decision and react is much slower. One study revealed that 1,500 people die every year in car accidents caused by drivers ages 15-24 who are tired. The accidents may happen because the driver falls asleep at the wheel. Or they may happen because the driver doesn't brake or turn fast enough to avoid an accident.

Why Don't Teenagers Get Enough Sleep?

Teenagers are often thought of as being lazy because they want to sleep all the time. But several studies suggest that the teenagers themselves are not to blame. Their brain chemistry is telling them to stay up late and sleep late in the mornings.



Infants often sleep 12 to 14 hours a day, including multiple naps throughout the day. Toddlers sleep 10 to 12 hours a night. They often also take a 1 to 2 hour nap each day. By the time a child is in kindergarten, he probably no longer needs a nap. He or she should still be getting 10 hours of sleep each night. Teenagers need close to nine hours of sleep. Most adults need 7 to 8 hours of sleep each night.

A brain chemical called melatonin tells the brain when to start feeling sleepy. This chemical is produced in a teenager's brain later in the evening than it is for children and adults. So Brooke's parents might start feeling sleepy at 8pm. But Brooke is still wide awake. In the mornings, the adults wake up with their brains ready to go. A teenager's brain doesn't get the same chemical "wake up" signal until a couple hours later.

Busy schedules make the problem even worse.

In addition to spending a full day at school, many teenagers also make time in their days for other activities. These activities may include sports practice, club meetings, volunteer work, part-time jobs, and time with friends and family.

School schedules are often part of the problem as well. In many places, middle and high schools start earlier in the morning. Elementary schools start later. The melatonin research suggests students at all levels would do better if this was switched.

"It's not that simple," responds school official Mike Jones. "If the elementary schools start earlier in the morning, they get out of school earlier in the afternoon. This means that many younger students would end up on their own during the afternoon while their parents are at work.

"Also, if high schools start later and finishes later in the day, there is less time in the afternoon for sports practices and other activities. And there would be less time for the part-time jobs many of the students need."

How to Get Good Sleep

Teenagers may not have a lot of control over their schedules and what time they have to be at school each day. But there are several things they can do to make sure they get the best sleep possible.

1. Go to bed around the same time each night. Wake up around the same time each morning. If you sleep in on the weekends, don't sleep more than two hours later than the time you normally wake up.
2. Don't drink beverages that contain caffeine, such as coffee and soda, after 4pm. Avoid alcohol, tobacco and sleeping pills.
3. Get exercise during the day. Take time in the evening to relax.
4. Keep lights low in the evening to help trigger your brain into being sleepy. Use bright lights in the morning to signal to your brain to wake up.